ORM Corner

Snakes in the Cockpit

By Lt. Dave Bartell

It was the first night of cruise, and the air wing was getting its carrier qualifications. We launched into a low-overcast-dark sky, with scattered showers. As we pushed from marshal, we descended into the rain and low clouds.

At six miles, an unsolicited master-caution-light illuminated. Multiple sweeps of the cockpit indicated the light had no related emergencies, and since I couldn't reset it, I dismissed it as a bad annunciator panel. We quickly rifled through our gear to find something to dim the master-caution light so I could see the ball. We contined our approach.

We finally taped over the master-caution light and were ready to catch up with the approach inside of tip-over. Then we discovered a bigger problem when I asked my ECMO 1 for windshield air. After 30 seconds, we realized we weren't getting any flow. A quick check of the cockpit circuit breakers did not fix our problem, and I still was closing fast on the ship. The rain really started to pick up, so I began to think that flying the ball (or even seeing the ship for that matter) might be challenging.

We still were in the overcast, and I was hoping that in the next few seconds we'd get the windshield air back or we'd break out and see well enough to land. It was about that time we hit 400 feet and finally came out of the overcast to see every light on the carrier contrasting brightly against the night sky. The windshield was so wet with the rain that all the lights formed an unusable blob. The only thing I could think to tell paddles was clara, and I started to hear the standard glideslope talkdown.

Of course, the light blob continued to get bigger, but I couldn't make out a centerline to line up on. There was a lot of controlled panic and trust in paddles going on in my cockpit as I hung on his every word coming through my headset. Paddles understood I couldn't see anything when I picked up a huge drift left in close. I was relieved to see the light blob turn red on the waveoff.

On the downwind, paddles and I had a few seconds to talk through my emergency, and he did a great job of trying to shore my waning confidence so we could all give it another shot. CATCC then started having its own problems, and the best they could give me was a descent to surveillance minimums. CAG finally weighed in and gave us a well-deserved trip to the beach.

On preflight the next morning, we noticed the bleed-air-isolation-valve switch in the nosewheel-well was turned off. Once it was turned back on, we regained windshield air and had an uneventful shipboard recovery.

A few lessons learned: First, you must know your NATOPS cold. I know that sounds trite, but in the heat of the battle that was our approach, we thought about circuit breakers and other system failures, but no one (including the CATCC rep) thought about the one switch that

Photo-composite by Allan Amen

actually enables the system. It's the kind of mistake you make only once.

Second, we didn't do a good job of conveying the nature of our problem to the LSOs. Everything happened so quickly we didn't have time (or take time) to tell paddles of the snakes in our cockpit. When I finally did get a clara call out, I'm not sure it was enough. We ended with an all-LSO meeting aboard the ship afterward to establish standards in this area. A call of "Clara ship" or "Clara everything" would have made the point. As an LSO, I now hawk line-up much more when I'm on the platform and guys call clara.

Third, I had every opportunity to break off the approach. That would have given me time to get my head in the game and to fix the problems. All of the problems taken individually didn't seem that bad. Together, of course, they almost killed me and a few others. It all comes back to the idea that if you're not happy with how things are going, try to keep the big picture and find yourself a path out.

Aviators live or die by NATOPS. If a procedure is not obvious as you sit in the ready room, it's going to be hard to bring that knowledge out in the heat of battle. Know the tools for survival that you started learning in the training command. The LSOs were there for *me* that night, and I didn't help them out.

Finally, keep your eye on the big picture. In the Prowler, it's simple to take one of the guys out of the details portion of the problem and have him QA your overall plan for the emergency. I had to learn these lessons—all of which have been written in blood. I'm just happy they didn't have to be rewritten in mine.

Lt. Bartell flies with VAQ-129.